

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in the Spirit of God: The Pollyanna Effect”
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Ezekiel 37:1-14; 1 John 3:1-3

It was a good news/bad news article. Every week I received a curated set of religious articles from Duke Divinity School. This article had both good news and bad news. The good news was that a large group of evangelical leaders had signed a letter to congress asking them to push forward with their efforts at sentencing reforms. They believed that the way men and women are sentenced today, especially for minor drug possession, does more harm than good; that it tears apart lives and families. The bad news was that a recent survey of church going Christians, meaning that they had attended church at least two times in the past month, showed that 62% of them believed that people ought to receive harsher sentences than they deserve...let me repeat that...ought to receive harsher sentences than they deserve in order to keep people from committing the same crime. I have to say I was taken aback by the second part of the article more than the first. But then I remembered the Pollyanna effect and it all made sense.

What is the Pollyanna Effect you ask? Well it is something that I made up but here is how it works. First, we need to remember the book and movie Pollyanna. They are about a young girl who has an incredibly positive outlook on life. Regardless of what happens to her she believes that there can be a positive outcome; sort of like a female Joel Osteen. In the Disney movie, she is played by a very cute Haley Mills. What I remember most about the movie is her interaction with the pastor. She is taken to church by her aunt who goes to what is obviously a Calvinist church where the only sermon topic is judgment. At one point, she asks the minister why he doesn't preach more about love. At first, he dismisses her, but as in all good movies he comes around and talks about love. That however is not the Pollyanna Effect. The Pollyanna Effect is the manner in which the movie was received. Women and girls went to see it. Men and boys did not. Even Disney himself said it was too saccharine...too nice and perhaps he should not have made it. And so, Pollyanna has come to mean something that is “unreasonably or illogically optimistic”; meaning something such as showing leniency in sentencing rather giving people harsher sentences than they deserve or putting drug users in rehab rather than in jail. After all this is real world and not a Pollyannaish one.

If that is the case however, I think that someone should tell God because that is the way God works in the world. God believes in that unreasonably and illogically optimistic idea that human beings are redeemable through love and that all judgment ought to be redemptive. We can see this in our Ezekiel text this morning. To set the scene, Ezekiel is writing to the Jewish people who are in exile in Babylon. They are there because they had chosen to ignore God's call to right living; to caring for widows, orphans and the poor. They are there because they believed more in military might than trusting God. In their despair, believing themselves to be dead as a people; believing that God had not only judged them but had abandoned them, Ezekiel is reminded that God's judgment is always redemptive. The dry bones of the people will again live. God will grant them new lives and new opportunities. God did not judge them and throw away the key. God judged them to save them and through them save the world. In a sense this

is the same story as this table (the communion table). God's work in Jesus, his receiving our judgment, the world's judgement was done to redeem us and to redeem the world. So, someone ought to tell God that this kind of redemptive love won't work.

Someone ought to tell Tim Dunn. Who is Tim Dunn? Well I am glad you asked. Tim Dunn is an ultra-conservative oil-man in Texas who has used his wealth to try to push the Texas legislature further to the right...which I did not think was possible. But in 2004 he contacted Governor Rick Perry's chief of staff and said, "Conservatives are wrong on crime. Scripture would not call us to build prisons and forget people." On his personal website, he wrote that "nonviolent crimes should be recompensed in a way that gets people back into the work force and adding to communities as quickly as possible," and that Texas should "focus on restoring victims and communities damaged by crime."¹ He then encouraged Perry's staff to do something about it. Over the past 12 years, at the urging to both liberals and conservatives, Texas has expanded drug treatment availability, created drug courts, veteran's courts, and mental health courts. They have changed the way parole violators are dealt with and in some cases, are allowing people to wipe out their conviction records. All of this, again supported by liberals and conservatives, has seen incarceration drop by 17 percent, juvenile incarceration drop by 75 percent and three prisons closed...all the while watching the crime rate drop by 27 percent. Someone ought to tell Texas that this Pollyanna approach will not work.

You and I worship the God who is about redemptive love. We follow a Jesus who would not build prisons and forget about people. The challenge for us is not to forget about those trapped in a justice system that believes redemptive justice is Pollyannaish. So, this is your annual reminder to call your senators and representatives on all levels to work for sentencing reforms. The bills I talked about last year² still have not been allowed to come to the floor for debate despite their bi-partisan support and the evidence that they work to redeem lives.

My challenge to you then is this, to once again write letters, send emails and make phone calls in order that we act as Pollyannas for Jesus, believing that redemption is possible.

¹ https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/14/opinion/even-in-texas-mass-imprisonment-is-going-out-of-style.html?_r=0

² The bi-partisan Sentencing and Reform Corrections Act of 2015 (S.2123) and in the House the Corrections and Recidivism Reduction Act of 2016 (HR759) and their version of the Sentencing Reform Act of 2015 (HR3713).